

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission



Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church
18423 John Connor Road
Cornelius, NC 28031

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
Local Landmark Designation Report
Prepared by Michele Lemere
August 2024

HISTORIC NAMES OF PROPERTY

Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church, previously known as Hunters Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church.

ADDRESS OF PROPERTY

18423 John Connor Road
Cornelius, NC 28031

PIN

00184138

DEED BOOK AND PAGE

2263-0295

ZONING

Single Family Residential - Acreage

LAND/ACREAGE

2.76 Acres

APPRAISED VALUE

The designation would not affect the owner's tax responsibility due to its exempt status as a religious institution. As of January 2021, the total appraised value of the property is \$824,700.

RECOMMENDATION FOR DESIGNATION

The Commission recommends the exterior of the building, cemetery and the property associated with the tax parcel for historic designation.

NAME/ADDRESS OF CURRENT PROPERTY OWNER

Hunters Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church
18423 John Connor Road
Cornelius NC 28031

DESIGNATION REPORT CONTENTS

This report includes maps and representative photographs of the property, a brief historical sketch and architectural description of the property, and documentation as to why and how the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. § 160D-945.

I. Abstract

Statement of Significance

Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church qualifies for landmark designation because of its historical and cultural significance to the postbellum African American experience in northern

Mecklenburg County. Sharecropping families founded the congregation at the turn of the 19th century; their descendants remain active more than 115 years later. The church's original location was in a region of Black and White farmers cultivating crops near the Catawba River. The creation of Lake Norman in the early 1960s forced the congregation to relocate the church and cemetery to its current location in 1961, which is surrounded by modern residential growth. Despite increasing development pressure, the Church represents the area's rural and institutional past. It is located on John Connor Road, a thoroughfare named for one of few early African Americans in north Mecklenburg to own a farm and a member of one of the church's founding families.

Statement of Integrity

Location – Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church retains a high degree of integrity of location, as it has been located at its current site since 1961 and is relatively close to the location of the congregation's original church facility.

Design – Providing a reliable example of postwar Modernist church architecture with its functional, minimalist design, Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church retains a high level of design integrity even though it includes an addition erected within 20 years of the 1961 structure. The façade maintains its original appearance and incorporates the wooden steeple and bell from the circa 1909 structure. The later rear addition and the gradual addition of stained glass windows represents the spirit of flexibility and growth encouraged by the Methodist denomination. While the architect is unknown, the design and layout are comparable to plans provided by the Methodist denomination during that time.

Setting – Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church is located on a Lake Norman peninsula, an area that has experienced explosive growth in the past 30 years and is virtually unrecognizable from the farming and leisure communities that once existed, thereby adversely impacting the integrity of its original rural setting.

Materials – Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church retains a high degree of integrity of materials. The 1961 brick façade, the 1909 steeple, the cornerstone and the stained glass windows remain fully intact. Aside from the ca. 1970s addition, which varies slightly in brick color and massing, there are few structural modifications.

Workmanship - Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church represents the Modernist style of rural mid-century African American churches that replaced small, postbellum, wooden structures. The structure embodies the workmanship typically seen during that time in rural Mecklenburg County, competently executing the structure's simple, functional design while reflecting the skills of mid-century rural Mecklenburg County craftsmen. The sustained physical integrity of the original structure evidences the high degree of workmanship in its construction.

Feeling – Despite encroaching development, the materials, location, property and terrain of the Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church building and property emit the feel of a small, country church, sustaining a moderate to high degree of integrity of feeling. The building sits close to the road and is surrounded by green open space. The cemetery is in the southwest corner of the property. A wooded border on three sides of the property helps maintain the rural feel. The large, modern homes surrounding the property accentuate the church's historic character.

Association - Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church is a significant example of a rural, family church that once served as the community touchstone and remains a place of worship. As

families move away and new residents move in, which happens throughout Mecklenburg County, these types of structures are becoming increasingly rare.

II. Maps

Location 1

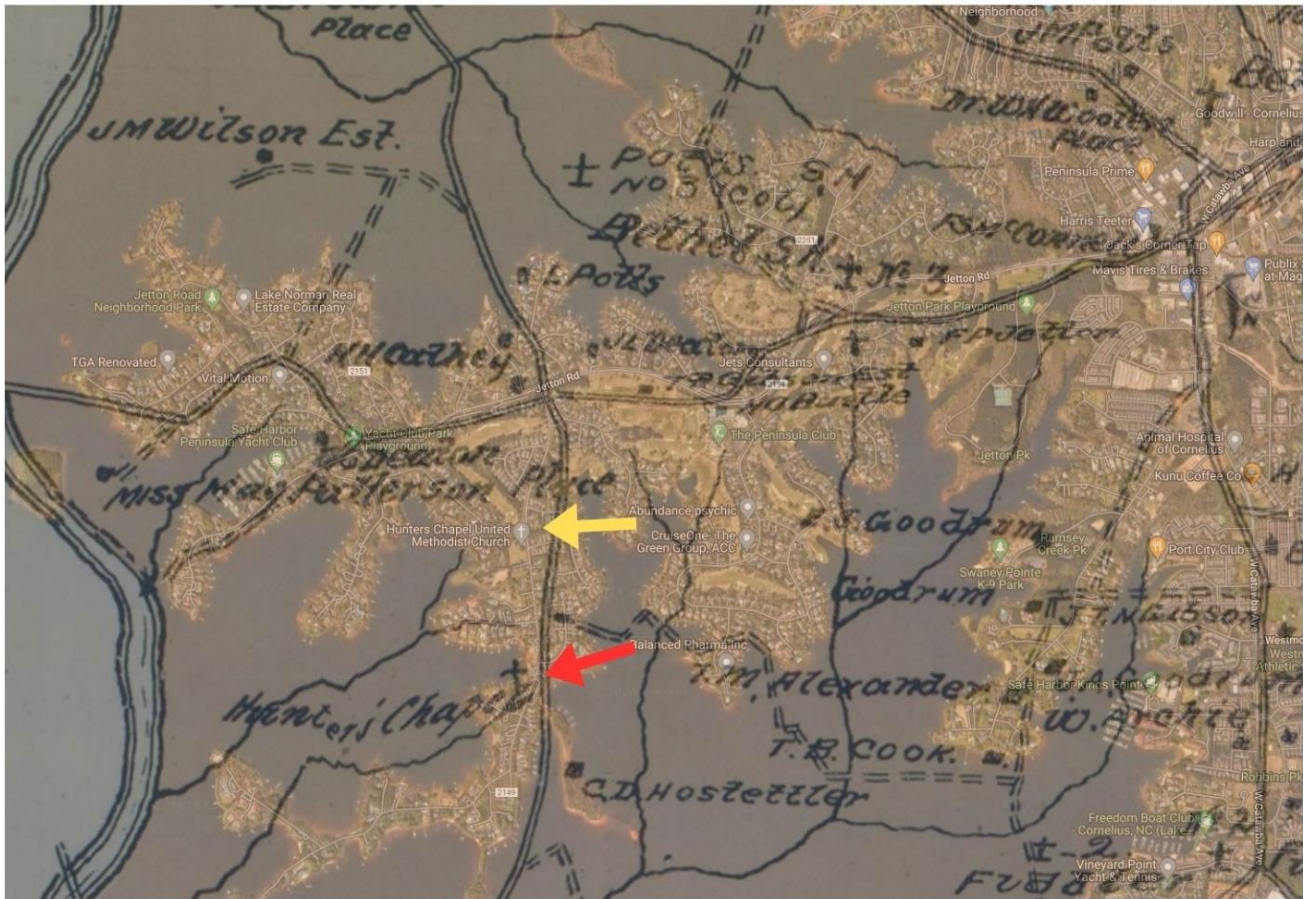
The church's first location on Beatties Ford Road currently lies beneath Lake Norman. This portion of the 1911 C.A. Spratt map of Mecklenburg County marks "Hunters Chapel" with a cross, indicating a church, before the existence of Lake Norman. This entire portion of land west of "Beatty Ford Road" was likely known as "Hunters Chapel" within Lemley township. The towns of Cornelius and Davidson are within Dewese Township at top right.



1911 Map of Mecklenburg County, <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ncmaps/id/959>

The map below superimposes a 2024 Google map with the 1911 Spratt map. The red arrow indicates the first church location, now under Lake Norman; the yellow arrow indicates the

current location. The alignment is slightly askew, as noticed in the curvature of Beatties Ford Road.



Historic Overlay Map, https://web.lib.unc.edu/nc-maps/interactive/Cm912-60_1911s.php

Location 2

The map below shows the church's current location outlined in green and nearly surrounded by a high-priced residential neighborhood. The small peninsula containing Connor Quay Court was once the location of the Connor family recreation center, known as Lakeview Country Club. The first church location was southeast of the peninsula. This surviving section of Beatties Ford Road was renamed John Connor Road in 1993. The area falls under the jurisdiction of the town of Cornelius.



Mecklenburg County Polaris, <https://polaris3g.mecklenburgcountync.gov/address/60298>

III. Historical Sketch

African Americans and Methodism

Students at Christ Church College in Oxford University developed the Methodist movement in the 1720s which worked to serve the needs of London's poor classes. Likewise, lower classes in the American colonies embraced the Wesleyan movement when it arrived here in the 1730s. Societies spread along the eastern seaboard and into Appalachia and came together to form the Methodist Episcopal Church at the denomination's Christmas Conference in 1784. It also reaffirmed its opposition to slavery at the conference, thus both enslaved and free African Americans were drawn to the denomination.¹

Racial differences in the United States prompted several splits within the denomination both before and after the Civil War. Groups of Black congregants frustrated with discrimination

¹ Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 49-50.

formed the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816 and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion) Church in 1820. In 1844, the remaining Methodist Episcopal Church, comprised of both Black and White worshippers, split over the issue of slavery. The Methodist Episcopal North faction remained opposed to slavery, while the Methodist Episcopal South permitted the institution among its members.²

The end of the war did not lead to racial integration within the denomination, but more division. In the antebellum period, the enslaved often worshipped with white slaveowners but were relegated to galleries or balconies. After emancipation, they separated from white congregations and formed their own churches, which offered spiritual autonomy and “became safe havens for a people under siege.”³ Though Black membership grew post-war in part through the ME North Church’s involvement in organizing missions and building schools through the Freedmen’s Aid Society, some southern Black Methodists branched off into the CME (Colored Methodist Episcopal, later Christian Methodist Episcopal) denomination. Others petitioned to form separate Black conferences within the Methodist Episcopal Church – segregated units that allowed for Black ordained preachers and elected representation in the General Conference. When White factions of the church merged and regional jurisdictions were formed in 1939, Black conferences were placed in a separate Central Jurisdiction. The Evangelical United Brethren Church and Methodist Church merged to form the United Methodist Church in 1968 and eliminated the Central Jurisdiction.⁴

Early Hunters Chapel History

Hunters Chapel was established as a Methodist Episcopal church which, according to current members, did not join the AME, AME Zion or CME denominations, thus functioned within the Central Jurisdiction until 1968.⁵ It is unclear whether its founding members had been enslaved. Church history maintains a founding date of 1909, though the congregation probably predates this by several years, and the “Hunters Chapel” name seems to refer to the surrounding community as well as the church itself. A Mecklenburg County deed dated July 10, 1890, shows the transfer of 1 ½ acres west of Beatties Ford Road from M.A. Gillespie and wife M.A. Gillespie to Adam Graham Morrow/Monro Houston and Columbus Mathews/Mathers, “Trustees of Hunters Chapple, a Methodist Church.”⁶ Gillespie was a White landowner who also gave land to Torrence Chapel AME Zion Church in 1868.⁷ Fifteen years later, a *Charlotte News* article published April 19, 1905 reported that the “colored people of Hunter’s Chapel are hauling lumber to build a new church. The plans indicate a very strong desire on the part of this people to supply themselves with an up-to-date structure,” and that “the congregation is very thrifty and

² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 50, 65. John Wesley previously expressed the Methodist opposition to slavery in his *General Rules* in 1743.

³ Stewart Gray and Paula Stathakis, “African American Resources in Mecklenburg County,” *North Carolina Digital Collections*, (September 2002): 14. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/african-american-resources-in-mecklenburg-county/378695>.

⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 66-7; “United Methodist African American Timeline,” <https://gcah.org/history/timelines/united-methodist-african-american-timeline/>

⁵ Edith Summers, interview with Michele Lemere, August 12, 2024.

⁶ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 0074, Pages 86-7.

⁷ Michael Connor, electronic message to Michele Lemere, August 14, 2024.

enterprising...”⁸ This news brief implies two things: Hunters Chapel was a recognizable, inhabited community within Lemley Township, and the existing congregation desired an “up-to-date” (i.e., newer, more modern) structure. A 1951 *Charlotte News* article about a planting demonstration at Connor farm is among a number of references to the community as a whole; it refers to the “farmers of the Hunter’s Chapel section of Mecklenburg County.”⁹

Further evidence of the church’s existence prior to 1909 lies in at least one gravestone that Duke Power relocated from the old church cemetery to the current site. Theodore Johnson, the infant son of J.G. and L. Johnson was born Sept. 8, 1901 and died Feb. 1903.¹⁰ Thus, he was buried on the church site years before the building was erected, suggesting that a congregation, perhaps informally, had begun to meet there.



Gravestone of infant Theodore Johnson, Sept. 8, 1901- Feb. 1903, at the current church cemetery in 2024. Duke Power moved it and others in 1961 to make way for Lake Norman.

While written records are unavailable,¹¹ it would not be unusual for a young congregation to form in this manner. Early Methodist “circuit riders” traveled on horseback to farm towns to visit fall revivals and camp meetings and evangelize. Each circuit, supervised by a conference preacher, could include up to 30 meeting places, few of which were actual meeting houses.

⁸ “Huntersville Happenings,” *The Charlotte News*, April 19, 1905. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/58568108/>.

⁹ “Demonstration at Connor Farm,” *The Charlotte News*, May 21, 1951, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/618158147/>

¹⁰ Duke Power Company, “Relocation of Various Cemeteries from Area Inundated by the Waters of Lake Norman,” Davidson College Archives and Special Collections, n.d., https://davidsonarchivesandspecialcollections.org/archives/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/01/Relocation_Various_Cemeteries_by_Duke_Power_Co.pdf

¹¹ Edith Summers interview. Summers, a former church secretary, said much of the church’s early records were damaged in storage.

Services were often held outdoors or in cabins or barns. These circuit riders were key to spreading Methodism throughout the country, particularly in the American frontier and rural south.¹² Hunters Chapel descendent and Methodist pastor Rev. Charlie Rivens explained that as a circuit would grow, a congregation would build a structure similar to a barn raising, often with monetary support from the Methodist conference. He believes this is what occurred with Hunters Chapel.¹³

Regardless of the exact date, by 1909 a structure was in place and became a community hub for its founding families. Current church members remember the small, wooden church, since swallowed up by Lake Norman. Vera Robertson, 85, is a farmer's daughter who remembers sitting in the back of the church and giggling at all the shouting as a child. She recalls a wooden church sitting on rocks. Inside was a wood floor, wood benches and a potbellied stove in the middle of the rectangular room. There was no indoor plumbing. Her family lived in a little house in the country (also now under Lake Norman), and they traveled more than a mile on foot through the woods, crossing a creek, to get to church. For those who drove, there was a dirt road connecting to Beatties Ford Road that would get muddy during the rain and vehicles would inevitably get stuck. Robertson has fond memories of homecomings, ball games and other gatherings held under the trees.¹⁴

African American churches in rural Mecklenburg were community anchors that provided entertainment, sport and sociability as well as spirituality to farm families with limited social contact throughout the week. "Going to church on Sundays was the culminating event of the week. Those who lived close to church walked to Sunday services; those who had to travel long distances arrived in surreys, mule carts, and ox carts. It was common for families to travel miles for Sunday services."¹⁵

John Connor Jr. grew up a short walk from the church and remembered looking forward to Sundays as an all-day event. The family would lay out their clothes on Saturday and head out the following morning. Each of the church families, most of whom were related, would bring a dish to share during a picnic after Sunday school and worship. "You didn't go to church to come back. It was all day... That was a socializing day for people in the neighborhood to get together... The church was a very close-knitted family in this area." If someone was missing that week, they would get a visit at the house to see if something was wrong. "People were deeply concerned about one another back then."¹⁶

Whether the Methodist Episcopal church helped erect the church building is unclear, but there would have been guidelines available to aid in planning and construction. The Methodist Episcopal Board of Church Extension published its first catalog of church plans in 1870, long before Sears & Roebuck's similar catalog for houses. Architect Benjamin D. Price created the

¹² "Circuit Rider," Encyclopedia Britannica, November 18, 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/circuit-rider>.

¹³ Charlie Rivens, interview with Michele Lemere, July 18, 2024.


¹⁴ Vera Robertson, interview with Michele Lemere, July 10, 2024.

¹⁵ Gray and Stathakis, "African American Resources in Mecklenburg County," 16.

¹⁶ John Connor Jr. and James Garfield Connor, Raw footage of video interview by WTVI, 2000, provided by Michael Connor.

plans, which started at \$2.50 for that of a small, wood church costing \$300 to \$1,000 to build. The congregation would receive a floor plan and slides of completed churches in wood, brick or stone. The catalog helped the denomination economically build places of worship during its significant growth era between the late 1800s and 1950.¹⁷

8 ARCHITECTURAL PLANS.—CHURCHES.



CHURCH PLAN, No. 1.—PERSPECTIVE.

PLANS FOR FRAME

Price List.	16x22 feet,)		22x27 feet,)
	16x27 feet,) \$2.00		22x32 feet,) \$3.50
	16x32 feet,)	20x27 feet,) \$3.00	22x37 feet,)
		20x32 feet,)	24x32 feet,)
	18x22 feet,)	20x37 feet,)	24x37 feet,) \$4.00
	18x27 feet,) \$2.50		24x42 feet,)
	18x32 feet,)		

These make neat, plain frame churches.

The posts of the smaller sizes are 10 feet, and the ceilings 14 feet in the middle.

The posts of the larger sizes are 12 feet, and the ceilings 16 feet 6 inches high in the middle.


The 16x22 feet size will seat 50 persons in the pews. The 24x42 size will seat 200 in the pews.

There is a vestibule in front. No class-rooms. The construction is of the cheapest character consistent with strength and durability, with or without plastering. The plans are arranged to be heated by one stove.

The cost varies from \$300 to \$900.

The belfry of No. 1 B, No. 2 A or No. 5, will be added to these plans for 50 cents extra.

We have a slight modification of this plan with plain or gothic windows, enlarged to 34x55 feet, posts 16 feet, ceiling 22 feet, price \$8. Also enlarged to 40x60 feet, posts 18 feet, ceiling 24 feet, price \$10.



CHURCH PLAN, No. 1 B.—PERSPECTIVE.

PLANS FOR FRAME.	24x37 feet,) \$4.00	PLANS FOR BRICK OR FRAME,	28x40 feet,) \$5.00
	24x40 ")		28x45 ") \$5.50
	26x40 ") \$4.50		28x50 ")
	26x45 ")		28x55 ") \$6.50
	30x50 ") \$6.00		32x50 ")
	30x55 ")		32x55 ") \$6.50

The belfry is 4 feet square on the smaller sizes, and 6 feet square on the larger.

The walls are 14 feet and the ceiling 20 feet high, in the middle. There is a vestibule in front; no class rooms.

These plans are heated by stoves.

The 24x40 plan will seat comfortably 160. The 28x45 plan will seat 200. The 32x50 plan will seat 270.

Where labor and materials are cheap, the 24x40 size will cost about \$1,000, and the 32x50 size about \$1,600.

Plans from the *Catalogue of Architectural Plans for Churches and Parsonages for 1889* include these for a plain frame church similar in footprint to Hunters Chapel. <https://archives.gcah.org/items/28552986-3268-4464-9208-f3157d915ab9>

The General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church maintains a series of mission photograph albums, including images that document Freedman's Aid Society work conducted in the early 20th century throughout the United States. While there are no images labeled Hunters Chapel included in the collection, these photos taken in the rural south may resemble the church's appearance and setting.

¹⁷ The United Methodist Church, "Methodist History: Church Plans Catalog," January 24, 2018, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/methodist-history-church-plans-catalog>.

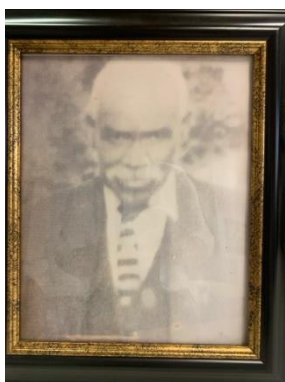


This screenshot of images from Mission Photograph Album Negro #4 are simply captioned “Negro rural church in the South.” <https://catalog.gcah.org/images/collections/show/183>

John D. Connor: Pioneering Farmer

Post Civil War African American families in Mecklenburg frequently became tenant farmers who rented land and sometimes lodging from white landowners, or sharecroppers who worked another man’s land and shared the meager profits with him. However, “there were notable exceptions to the rural poverty among most African American farmers in the early twentieth century, and the best examples of substantial African American farms are in north Mecklenburg near Davidson, and in west Mecklenburg in Shuffletown.”¹⁸ John Dolphus Connor was one such farmer.

Connor was born May 23, 1884 in Lincoln County to Cheasmon (or Cheeseman) Monroe Connor and Janie Johnson, the fifth of 19 children (the first four children were born to



Cheasmon’s first wife, Nancy Longcry, who died in 1881; the children after John were born to Sylvia Johnson.) Cheasmon’s father, Cyrus L. Connor, was a Major in the 137th Regiment of the Union Army during the Civil War and commanded a Colored Regiment. Cheasmon’s mother, Margaret “Peggy” Graham, born 1815, was enslaved by Henry William Connor, a North Carolina congressman. According to family history, Cheeseman Connor, born in 1855, came to the Charlotte area from Ireland with a sister. He was a superintendent of Hunters Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, and was a sharecropper like many of the early church members.¹⁹

Undated portrait of Cheeseman Connor courtesy of Michael Connor.

¹⁸ Gray and Stathakis, “African American Resources in Mecklenburg County,” 11.

¹⁹ Michael Connor, interview with Michele Lemere, July 29, 2024.

John Connor and Roxie Burton married on Christmas Day in 1908 and settled in North Mecklenburg, raising 12 children (Rosie Lee, Doward, Georgia, Janie, Josephine, John D. Jr., Cheeseman, Maggie, Robert, Garfield, Lewis and James Arthur) and two foster children (Sherman Burton and Joe Connor.) Like his father, John and Roxie Connor were members of



Undated portrait of a young John Connor.

Hunters Chapel Church, where he helped with cleaning and minor repairs.²⁰ In 1922, John Connor purchased 60 acres off of Beatties Ford Road at auction through an intermediary.²¹ In a 1949 *Charlotte News* article, he is described as a former tenant farmer with a fourth grade education who “had seen his father struggle on someone else’s land a lifetime with little to show for his efforts. That wasn’t going to happen to him if there was any way to avoid it.” The article identified Connor as one of 107 Black farm owners in Mecklenburg of the 700-800 Black residents working as farmers here at the time. By its writing, Connor had owned 100 acres and was touted in the paper for having excellent examples of strip farming and terracing.²²

He grew cotton, wheat, corn and sugar cane, bringing the cotton to Cornelius for ginning and the cane to Cashion’s in Huntersville for processing into two 50 gallon barrels of molasses. To supplement the family income, he would send the children with sacks of firewood, chickens, eggs and butter to sell in the Beatties Ford Road area. There were few Black families in the immediate area, mostly sharecroppers, and White farmers and landowners. The children would go to Caldwell School 3 miles away for half a day and then pick cotton for White people.²³ By midcentury, most of the Connor children were less interested in farming. Some joined the military, moved away or pursued other lines of work. That would become moot; by the 1960s, much of the White and Black farms - and Hunters Chapel Church - would be underwater. The remainder of John Connor’s land would become lakefront property.

Lake Norman and the mid-century move

By the late 1950s, Duke Power (now Duke Energy) had announced plans to build a mile-long dam on the Catawba River at Cowan’s Ford, a hydroelectric power station, and a 32,500 acre lake. The company had been acquiring land since the 1920s, but purchased 30,000 acres of mostly family farmland leading up to the dam’s completion in 1962. The new waterway covered over the Battle of Cowan’s Ford Revolutionary War site where General William Lee Davidson was killed; two textile mills and villages; and many homes, churches, business and roads not tall enough to require bulldozing to prevent interference with boats. John Connor sold 65.5 acres, near the original church property, to Duke Power in December 1960.²⁴ He also was

²⁰ Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “An African American Farmer and His Wife,” Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1998, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/An-African-American-Farmer-And-His-Wife.pdf>.

²¹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 485, Pages 41-2.

²² “One Fifth of Mecklenburg County Farmers are Negro,” *The Charlotte News*, May 24, 1949, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/622026725/>.

²³ John Connor Jr., WTVI raw footage, 2000.

²⁴ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 2207, Page 83.

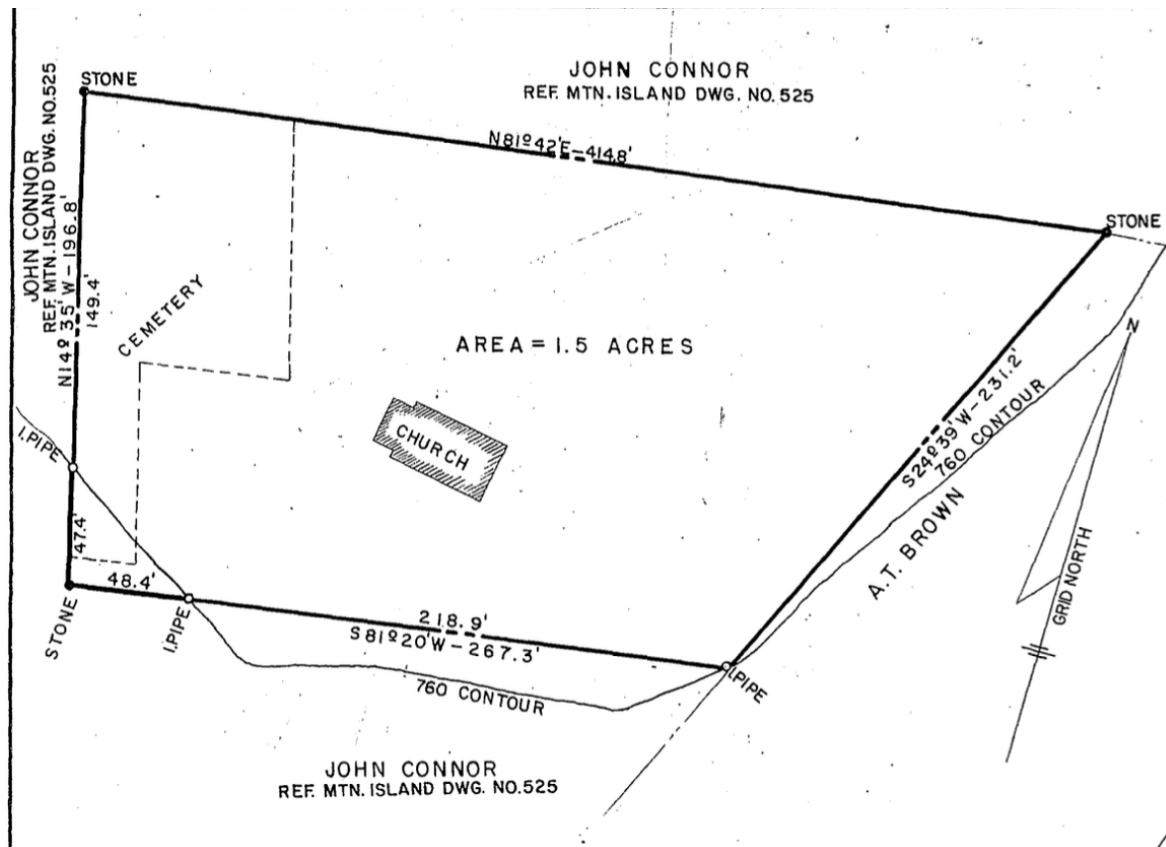


Image from the church's deed of the original church property to Duke Power in November 1960 (Mecklenburg County Deed Book 2210, Pages 115-19.) Note the footprint of the church and cemetery. A dirt driveway connected to Beatties Ford Road. John Connor sold his adjacent property to Duke the following month.

Though the old church would soon be submerged, the congregation's new home was already becoming established. In October 1960, Duke Power deeded 2.3 acres fronting Beatties Ford Road to the church's trustees – John Connor, Aussie Rivens, James Torrence, Lewis Connor and Pink McNeely - and a new brick building was constructed the following year. Duke had acquired the property in 1923 from J.R. and Chester Belle Withers, who had purchased it from Annie H. Brown earlier that year.²⁶ Perhaps Duke (then called Catawba Manufacturing and Electric Power Company) had secured the land during the early days of planning the Cowan's Ford dam project.

The Cemetery

Duke also facilitated the relocation of markers and remains from eight cemeteries, including Hunters Chapel. A Duke document notes seven marked graves, including “Emma, wife of C.B. Matthews – died June 26, 1906” and “approximately 21 graves unmarked or unidentifiable.”²⁷ A public notice looking for next of kin was published March 20, 1961 in *The Charlotte Observer*

²⁶ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 2263, Page 295-99.

²⁷ Duke Power, “Relocation of Various Cemeteries.” Emma, wife of C.B., could be related to Columbus Matthews, named as a church trustee on the 1890 church deed.

referencing the same graves.²⁸ However, the next page in the Duke report notes 14 graves.

Next, a letter to Wallace H. Kuralt of the Mecklenburg County Department of Public Welfare dated July 11, 1961 states that through authorization from church trustees, Duke was to hire a licensed undertaker to:

- Remove, clean and relocate the monuments of Theodore R. Johnson, infant son of J.G. and L. Johnson (Sept. 8, 1901-Feb. 1x, 1903); and Clementine (January 12, 1897-March 9, 1917) and Tischa (Sept. 16, 1914-April 8, 1915), both daughters of C.M. and S.V. Connor and kin to John Connor.
- Replace with comparable quality the grave markers of T.C. Conner , Willie Lewis Rivens, Samuel Lewis Patterson, Rossie Lee Conner and Josephine Leazer.
- Open, remove remains, place in boxes and reinter the graves of James William Conner, Willie Lewis Rivens, Samuel Lewis Patterson, Rossie Lee Conner and Josephine Leazer.²⁹

The monuments of Theodore Johnson and Clementine and Tischa Connor were indeed moved and remain in the current cemetery as of 2024, but that of Emma Matthews is not present. There are other discrepancies between the Duke documents and what else stands in the cemetery in 2024. There are additional monuments that appear to be from a pre-1960s time period not on the list to be moved and others that were supposed to be replaced but apparently were not. Finally, some church members who would have passed before the new church was built now have markers that appear to be post-1960 and may have been purchased by family members or the church.



The monuments of sisters Clementine and Tischa Connor (left) and Theodore Johnson (right) were moved from the old Hunters Chapel cemetery to the current cemetery as planned.

²⁸ “Notice,” *The Charlotte Observer*, March 20, 1961, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/619966302/>

²⁹ Duke Power, “Relocation of Various Cemeteries.” Note: Connor is spelled with an e in some of the documentation and other family names are inconsistent. The letter contains illegible handwriting near some of the names.



These markers for Charles Gabriel and twins Ben and Glen Gabriel appear to be pre-1960s. Each has a newer flat marker at its base. Black stickers have been placed on the twins markers to help read the original carving. They were not on the list to be moved.



Conversely, the Duke letter states that the grave markers for Rossie Lee Connor (left) and Josephine Leazer were to be replaced, but those in the cemetery in 2024 appear to predate the 1960s.



This monument for Queen Patterson (1864-1940) is an example of one that would have been replaced or purchased later.

The Church Amidst a Changing Landscape

As the waters began to rise, filling Lake Norman, Hunters Chapel continued to function as both a church and a community. Hunters Chapel was among a handful of communities to compete consistently in the Mecklenburg Negro Community Development Contest (others included J.H. Gunn, winner for several years, as well as African American communities in Huntersville, Hickory Grove, Lower Providence and more) whose winner would compete in the two-state Piedmont contest.³⁰ The Hunters Chapel Sluggers competed in a community baseball league³¹ and the Hunters Chapel Gospel Singers performed in community services.³² The transition to the new church was speedy. Charlie Rivens remembers as a young boy wondering why they had to attend the old, small church with just a stove for heat, but then overnight, it seemed, they had a modern building. “It was like - zoom, zoom - just like Lake Norman. One day it’s farmland, people bailing hay and cutting okra and cutting grapes, and then the next day, it was a lake... There were barns one day, barbed wire fence one day, and the next day you had lake.”³³

The core families – Connor, Rivens, Patterson, Leazer, Alexander, McNeely, Gabriel – and their kin continued to worship at the new structure, bringing old traditions to the new space. Vera Robertson, by then a young mother, remembers feeling nostalgic for the old wooden church, but overall the modern building was a blessing and the traditions and celebrations from the old church, as well as its steeple and bell, were brought to the new building. It remained, as it does today, a family church. Many of its members continued to live in the new Lake Norman area.³⁴

John Connor’s vision was to keep the property for his family; thus he was unwilling to sell his remaining land and left it to his children after he died in 1982. Much of his remaining acreage formed a peninsula where his children built Lakeview Country Club on 8 acres in 1972. The club hosted reunions and receptions, and was best known for its reggae concerts throughout the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵ It closed in 1991 after being zoned “off-limits.”³⁶ Mecklenburg County Commissioners hosted a public hearing in 1993 to rename that portion of Beatties Ford Road “Hunters Chapel Road,” but it was ultimately renamed “John Connor Road.”³⁷ And after decades of pressure from developers, the family sold the old Lakeview Country Club site making way for a 23 house development called “Connor Quay.” A placard explaining John and Roxie’s legacy marks the entrance to the neighborhood, where homes routinely sell for well over \$1 million and

³⁰ Clyde Osborne, “Huntersville to Compete in PADA Contest,” *The Charlotte Observer*, November 23, 1961, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/619983729/>

³¹ “Dodgers Slug Hunters Club,” *The Charlotte Observer*, July 23, 1961, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/619982435/>

³² “Many Choirs to be Heard at Services,” *The Charlotte Observer*, April 12, 1952. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/615355197/>

³³ Charlie Rivens interview.

³⁴ Vera Robertson interview.

³⁵ Garfield Connor, WTVI raw footage, 2000.

³⁶ Dennis Romero, “Uptown Reggae,” *The Charlotte Observer*, Sept. 3, 1993, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/626563742/>

³⁷ Pat Borden Gubbins, “Hearing Scheduled on New Name for Beatties Ford Road Section,” *The Charlotte Observer*, June 20, 1993. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/626576176/>

a 12,000 square foot home with 6 bedrooms and 9 bathrooms sold for \$6.75 million in 2023.³⁸ A small number of Connor descendants still owns homes along the west side of John Connor Road.

Just as John Connor has been memorialized as a community leader, Hunters Chapel stands as a symbol of the postbellum evolution of African American worship in the south worthy of commemoration. It represents the significant role of African Americans in the development of the United Methodist denomination and the role of the church in 20th century rural, farm life. Explosive growth has changed the landscape of northern Mecklenburg County, drawing newcomers from across the country, yet descendants of Hunters Chapel's founding families continue to worship and share fellowship there today. "When talking about the history of the Black churches, why would you not want to recall this history, from the wooden, shanty shack, coal little stove to heat the building, to where they are now? The history needs to be kept, told and retold, and what better way than to preserve it and keep it."³⁹

IV. Architectural Assessment

Setting

Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church is a rural church surrounded primarily by large, 21st century, single-family homes, some of which include waterfront property and docks. It is accessed via Jetton Road and sits a short distance beyond the entrance to The Peninsula neighborhood. The church faces John Connor Road and is close to the road, with a loose gravel horseshoe driveway running parallel with the entrance and extending to a small number of parking spaces. The property is bordered by a thin layer of woods on three sides. The cemetery sits on the southwest corner of the 2.76 acre lot.

Overview

The church's architecture is an example of a post war, Modernist church of simple, functional design, with a gently sloped roofline, geometric features and minimalist adornments. Most of the African American churches in Mecklenburg County were small frame buildings until wealth increased among these congregations after World War II. "As a result nearly all of Mecklenburg's Black churches were razed and replaced with more modern masonry buildings, significantly altered, or abandoned for a new location."⁴⁰ As noted previously, Hunters Chapel was forced to abandon its original location and was indeed replaced with a more modern masonry building. The church's architect/builder is unknown.

By the 1960s, the Methodist Church was advising against stock plans for church construction and instead recommended congregations hire architects to better plan for the specific site. A 1961 planning book focused more on the types of errors to avoid in church design and steps to follow throughout the project.⁴¹ However, the 1961 Hunters Chapel building resembles a plan contained

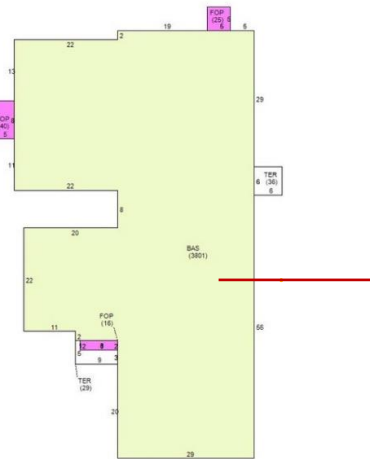
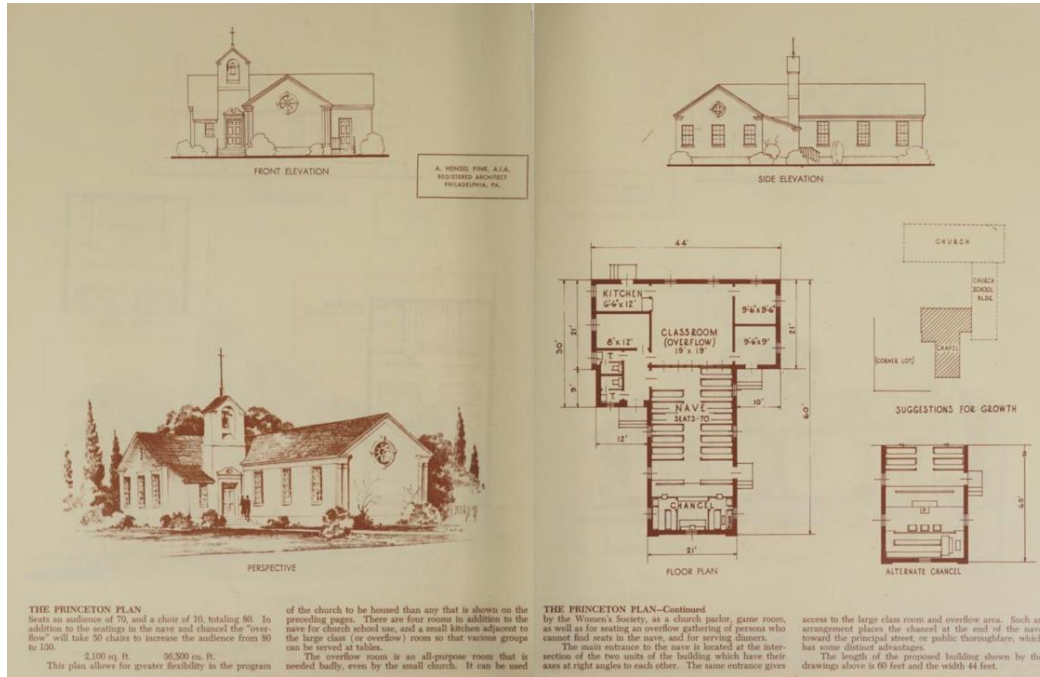
³⁸ Zillow, "17240 Connor Quay Ct, Cornelius, NC 28031," Accessed September 5, 2024, https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/17240-Connor-Quay-Ct-Cornelius-NC-28031/51524830_zpid/.

³⁹ Charlie Rivens interview.

⁴⁰ Gray and Stathakis, "African American Resources in Mecklenburg County," 46.

⁴¹ Methodist Church (U.S.). Department of Architecture, *Detailed Planning*, (Philadelphia :Division of National Missions of The Methodist Church, 1962), <http://archive.org/details/detailedplanning0000meth>.

in a Methodist guide for church planning published a decade earlier in 1952. Called *A Guide to Church Planning: the Small Church*, it emphasizes the importance of the church to be well furnished, attractive and artistic and with provisions for activities beyond simply worship led by a preacher as the central figure.⁴² Hunters Chapel today includes an addition built sometime in the 1960s or 1970s that added a kitchen, extra restrooms and a flexible meeting space.⁴³



The Hunters Chapel footprint as it exists today resembles the "Princeton Plan" from pages 12-13 of *A Guide to Church Planning: The Small Church* pictured above. The red line on the footprint graphic at right indicates where the addition was extended to the rear of the original, front facing L shaped building. Graphic from <https://property.spatalest.com/nc/mecklenburg/#!/property/6428>

⁴² *A Guide to Church Planning: The Small Church: Section I*, (The Joint Committee on Architecture of the Section of Church Extension Division of Home Missions and Church Extension and The Department of the Local Church Board of Education of The Methodist Church, 1952), 4-5, 18, <http://archive.org/details/guidetochurchpla0001unse>.

⁴³ Edith Summers interview. Summers reported this general timeframe; on the Polaris Time Machine, it appears to be absent in 1978, but present in 1980.

The one-story, 3,947 square foot church is constructed primarily of red brick veneer, shingle roofing, white wood soffits and trim, and sits upon a crawl space foundation. The chancel and nave is 29 feet wide with a front gable and protrudes 20 feet from the main entrance, which joins a side gabled office and bathroom space at a right angle. A sidewalk leads to the main entrance and patio featuring a rectangular, brick planter and black metal fence. A white wooden steeple,



salvaged from the former 1909 church and containing the original bell (according to church members) is affixed with a cross and sits atop the main entrance consisting of double doors painted red and accessed by a five-stair brick staircase. A brick chimney sits atop the side gable behind the steeple. The church includes three additional entrances: a single red door leading out to a small brick landing and five brick stairs with metal railing on the north elevation, a single white door leading out to a wooden landing and six stair staircase with metal railing on the rear elevation, and a single red door with sidelights leading out to a 7 stair brick staircase and metal railing on the south elevation. Windows are trimmed with white casing and include rectangular stained glass with triangle accents at top, square and rectangular clear glass windows, and a single hexagon-shaped window piercing the front elevation. The stained glass windows include biblical scenes and the names of the church members to whom they are dedicated.

This window, dedicated to John and Roxie Connor and photographed from the interior, was installed after Roxie passed in 1964 but before John passed in 1982.

Façade

The front (east) elevation represents the way the church looked when first built in 1961. The exterior chancel wall includes two symmetrical stained glass windows and a clear, hexagon window centered under the gable. The double doors of the main entrance are accessible via stairs or ramp. Two more stained glass windows and the cornerstone are on the south exterior wall of the nave.





North Elevation

The north elevation runs 85 feet long and includes five more stained glass windows – three on the original building and two past the side entrance on the addition. The seam and a difference in brick color are noticeable between the third window and the entrance. The entrance leads to a multipurpose area that can be closed off with louvred doors or opened for extra space during services.



Rear (west) Elevation

The rear elevation consists completely of the addition. Note that the stained glass windows do not include the decorative triangle at the top. The rear windows were added later, according to Edith Summers, probably replacing standard windows. The crawl space access door is present and the rear door leads to more multipurpose space.



South Elevation

The south elevation includes a small gabled wing consisting of the restrooms and office space that is part of the original footprint and a larger, gabled wing added later to house additional restrooms, meeting space and a kitchen. The chimney from the original portion of the building is visible to the left of the steeple.



Interior

The main front doors open to a small lobby accessible to the nave to the right and the restrooms and office to the left. The bell ringer hangs from the ceiling inside. The rear of the nave opens to flexible meeting space and the later addition that includes more restrooms and a kitchen.



The nave is functional with minimalist adornments indicative of the midcentury style.



Rope pull for the original church bell housed in the 1909 steeple.



Door leading to flexible meeting space. As recommended by the United Methodist denomination, it includes the ability to open up or close off space to fit the congregation's needs.



Meeting space between the nave and another set of louvered doors in the addition.



Kitchen addition circa 1970.

Cemetery

The cemetery was moved from the old church property to the southwest corner of the new location circa 1961. The oldest legible marker is dated 1903, but some collected remains may be older. It is adjacent to a multi-million waterfront property.



Setting



The church sign facing drivers on John Connor Road, with the church's U-shaped gravel driveway at right.

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